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ABSTRACT

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ABSTRACT

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The Use of Telephone Survey Techniques to Study a Hidden Family Problem

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Parental Child Snatching:

The Use of Telephone Survey Techniques to Study a Hidden Family Problem

This paper follows up my workshop presentation in 1976, "Methods for Studying Sensitive Family Topics" (Gelles, 1978). That paper cast a wide net and reviewed various research design and sampling strategies for investigating sensitive or taboo family topics. This discussion was drawn primarily from my experience in studying child abuse, wife abuse, and other forms of family violence. The paper postulated that one of the reasons why research on child abuse, wife abuse, marital rape, and other family problems was rare, was that family social scientists had not addressed or begun to solve the various problems associated with family behavior which was both sensitive and which had a low base rate.

The current paper focuses on one sensitive and largely hidden family problem--parental child snatching (the abduction of children by their custodial parents). The paper is a "work in progress" and details the various struggles and problems associated with trying to study a topic which: (a) in all likelihood has a much lower annual base rate than child abuse; (b) because of various legal issues, is frequently not considered a "real" family problem; and, (c) the very nature of the issue--the taking or hiding of a child or children--means that potential subjects for the study are truely hidden.

The first portion of the paper reviews the scant literature on the problem of parental child snatching. Not only is this a sensitive topic with an assumed low base rate, but like child abuse, it is a topic mired in definitional confusion. Next, the paper reviews the method chosen to investigate parental child snatching--the telephone interview. This method is reviewed in terms of its cost efficiency, response rate, and the application to the problem of child snatching. Advantages and disadvantages of the method are discussed, both in terms of the specific topic of child snatching and in terms of wider applicability to family research.

PARENTAL CHILD SNATCHING: AN OVERVIEW

Parental child snatching, also referred to as parental kidnapping, child stealing, child abduction, legal kidnapping and child snatching emerged as a social issue in the late 1970's.[1] Unofficial estimators guess (without data) that perhaps 25,000 to 100,000 children each year are either abducted by (or for) a parent or are unlawfully retained by a parent at the conclusion of a visitation period (Agopian, 1980a; 1980b; 1980c; Lewis, 1978; Westgate, 1979; Dodson, 1979; U.S. Senate, 1979). Victims, legal experts, and authors of magazine and journal articles also guess that the frequency of parental kidnapping

is increasing, perhaps as a consequence of the rapidly rising divorce rate (Agopian, 1980a; 1980b; 1980c; United States Senate, 1979).

As in the case of other social issues which emerged from behind the closed doors of American households to become social problems in the 1970's, the mandate to address the problem of child snatching was generated by presenting estimates of tens of thousands of victims, personal testimony of the anguish and emotional heartache of the parent who has had a child abducted, and references to the likelihood of significant long-term damage to the children who are kidnapped. Mention is sometimes made in newspaper accounts of the case of a child who was in fact killed in an automobile accident during the course of an abduction (Haas, 1977).

Similarly, as with other issues of children's rights and family social problems, the problem of parental child snatching was initially addressed by legalization (Newberger and Bourne, 1978). The Uniform Child Custody Jurisdiction Act was drafted in an attempt to dissuade parents from "forum shopping" for favorable custody decrees. A series of international conferences were held in the Hague to draft international treaties to deal with the problem of international kidnapping. Numerous pieces of legislation were filed in Congress to attempt to address child kidnapping.

In addition to the parallels between the generation of concern for child snatching and other social/family problems such as family violence, child abuse and neglect, marital rape, sexual abuse of children, etc., there are similarities between the current state of knowledge and research on parental child snatching and the early stages of research on child abuse, child neglect, wife abuse, sexual abuse, elderly abuse, and domestic violence.

First, although interest and concern about child snatching emerged in the 1970's, there is some evidence in legal case law, and a general feeling that child kidnapping has always been an aspect of marital and custody disputes and divorce (Katz, et al., 1980). Thus, child snatching like child abuse and family violence, has probably not been attended to as a result of "selective inattention" (Dexter, 1958). Parental or child kidnapping was not considered a social problem prior to the 1970's in large part because it was not illegal in many states, and even the victims—the parents from whom children were taken or retained--would not think of themselves as victims of a crime. Legal precedents, such as the 1932 Federal Kidnap legislation, also called the "Lindbergh Law," specifically excluded the taking of a child by a parent from another parent as a case of kidnapping requiring legal redress. Case law indicates that many courts do not view the so-called abduction of a child by one custodial parent from another as a case of kidnapping (Katz, et al., 1980). In other words, in many states, if there is no custody decree, or if there is joint custody, a father can take his child to another state, or country and deny the mother access to the child and not be liable to criminal prosecution. Until the recent promulgation and passage of the Uniform Child Custody Jurisdiction Act (which had been passed in at least 45 states as of July, 1980), a parent could "legally" kidnap a child by taking the child out of the state where s/he did not have custody, to another state and obtain a favorable custody ruling (thus, for many years the issue of parental kidnapping was called "legal kidnapping" (Demeter, 1977; Trescott, 1976).

Thus, just as it was difficult to measure the extent of child abuse or wife abuse before they were viewed as crimes and social problems, and just as it is difficult to gauge the extent of marital rape because many states still carry spousal exclusion clauses in their rape statutes, it has been difficult to determine the magnitude of parental child snatching without either: (1) a legal definition of what child snatching is, and (2) a consciousness on the part of victims that they have been victimized.

A second parallel with the current state of knowledge on parental child snatching and the early stages of research on family violence is that, to date, there have been no scientifically generated statistics on the following aspects of child snatching:

1. Incidence and prevalence.
2. Demographic characteristics of offenders, victims, and children involved (e.g., age and sex of offender, occupation, education, age of child, etc.).
3. Number of officially reported cases.
4. Status of officially reported cases.
5. Consequences of abduction or retention for the child.

To a certain extent, the issue of child abduction has been what sociologists refer to as a "latent social problem" (Merton and Nisbet, 1976), and what others refer to as an "underground problem."

The Current State of Knowledge

The Hague Special Commission on International Child Abduction by One Parent distributed questionnaires to all delegates in August, 1978 asking for information on whether the delegate's country had experienced an increase in the frequency of child abduction in the past five years, and if so, what would be the reason for the increase. Also requested was information on statistics or other data available on the number of cases made known to courts or administrative authorities involving child abduction (Dyer, 1978).

Responding on behalf of the United States, delegate Brigette Bodenheimer replied:

> "No statistics or other data on the number of abductions by parents are available in the United States....As far as can be determined, no research studies of the causes and effects of abduction have been published in the United States."

Nevertheless, Bodenheimer also comments:

> "There is no question that parental abductions... have become more numerous in the United States in recent years....One obvious reason is the steep rise in the divorce rate....Published estimates of parental abductions (interstate and international) range from 25,000 to 100,000 cases per year." (Bodenheimer, 1979).

A review of newspaper reports, magazine articles, sociology, psychology, and legal bibliographies, and the files of the National Institute of Justice indicates that Bodenheimer's conclusion that there are no scientifically generated statistics or research studies is still accurate. The single exception is the research conducted by Professor Michael Agopian of 91 cases of child abduction filed and/or rejected for prosecution by the Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office (Agopian, 1980a; 1980b; 1980c; 1981).

Nevertheless, despite a lack of scholarly research, official statistics, or attempts to estimate the actual extent of the problem of child abduction by one parent, there are some commonly accepted "facts" which are discussed by those familiar with, or concerned about, the problem of child snatching. Among the most common and consistently cited data are:

1. <u>There are between 25,000 to 100,000 children who are abducted by a parent each year</u>.

<u>Comments</u>. A review of the popular and professional literature on the subject of parental child snatching consistently and uniformly turns up the estimate of 25,000 to 100,000 child abductions per year. The figure is so consistent it would appear to be an official and generally accepted estimate of incidence. Some writers, in fact, attribute this estimate to "official" sources, such as The Library of Congress (Eccleston, 1980), and the Congressional Record (Bodenheimer, 1979). In point of fact, however, the estimates of between 25,000 to 100,000 cases are probably most accurately attributable to Arnold Miller and his wife Ray Gummel, who organized and operate Children's Rights Incorporated (Duckworth, 1977; Trescott, 1976). It is apparent that the 25,000 to 100,000 estimate is a projection made by Mr. Miller and Ms. Gummel based on their correspondence and contacts in the course of operating CRI (Mullin, 1978). Despite the fact that this estimate has become the semi-official statistic for the field of parental child snatching, and despite the fact that the statistic is now attributed to "experts," "authorities," The Library of Congress, and the United States Congress, the figure has no scientific standing. In short, there is no way of scientifically knowing whether this estimate is lower, higher, or approximately the same as the true incidence of child abduction. Moreover, there is no way of knowing what this statistic refers to, as there is no precise definition of child abduction shared by those who cite the Children's Rights Incorporated estimate.

2. <u>Sixty to 70 percent of abductions or child snatchings take place before a custody decree is issued</u>.

<u>Comments</u>. This statistic is nearly as widely and as consistently cited as the incidence estimate. It too has been attributed to the United States Congress and to "experts" and "authorities." And again, it appears

to have been generated by Children's Rights Incorporated (Duckworth, 1977).

If both figures cited by CRI are accurate, this would mean that between 15,000 and 60,000 of the children abducted would have been abducted before a final custody decree. From the point of view of many courts, these acts would not be kidnapping at all, since case law indicates that many courts are of a mind that a kidnapping can not take place without a custody decree (Katz et al., 1980). Thus, if one takes a rather narrow definition of child abduction, that is taking or retaining children by a non-custodial parent, then the incidence estimate becomes much lower according to the CRI figures.

3. The frequency of child abduction is increasing.

Comments. It is a paradox that while most all the writings on child abduction mention that the incidence is increasing, the "official" incidence statistic cited since 1976 has always been the CRI figure of 25,000 to 100,000. Most writers explain the view that the frequency is increasing by citing the increase in divorce in the United States (Agopian, 1980a; 1980b; 1980c; 1981). Certainly, there is no doubt that the number of divorces has increased, and with it the number of children eligible for abduction. However, the divorce rate has actually remained stable since 1976, at little above 20 divorces per 1,000 marriages, and there is reason to believe the rate will not rise in the near future. Thus, the increase in the number of divorces could account for an increase in the frequency but not the incidence of parental child snatching.

It is unlikely that the change in the frequency of divorce can completely account for a proposed increase in child abductions. In all likelihood, if there is an increase in child snatching it is due to the combination of more children being available for kidnapping (due to the larger number of divorces and children involved in divorces), increased mobility in society, increased working opportunities for mothers, and increases in alternative family life styles which make kidnapping possible, such as dual career/dual residence marriages.

What is clear is that there has been increasing attention paid to the problem of parental child snatching, and, as with family violence, this increased attention has probably sensitized more people to see and define previously unrecognized incidents as child abduction.

4. Men are typically the abductors and the children are typically taken from their mothers.

Comments. Most individuals familiar with the issue of parental child snatching believe that males are the most frequent abductors of children. In the absence of hard data this fact is supported by data which show that the majority of single parent families are headed by women--(Bureau of the Census, 1982) and that the custody of children of divorce is more likely to be placed with the mother. In addition, it is implied that the legal system provides fathers with a "right" to take their children if they (the fathers) are providing child support (Lewis, 1976). Agopian's analysis of 91 cases of parental kidnapping handled by the Los Angeles County District Attorney found that males

were perpetrators of child stealings in 71 percent of the cases, while females were perpetrators in the remaining 29 percent of the cases (1980a, 1980b, 1981).

Katz's associates have found a pattern in their analysis of case law on child abduction (Katz et al., 1980). Examining only cases of child abduction which were appealed, Katz's associates noted that the difference between male and female perpetrators was narrower than those noted by Agopian and others. Perhaps, they hypothesize, males are more likely to be the perpetrators, but when they are victimized they are more likely (and females less likely) to file criminal charges; or, when offenders to appeal a civil conviction. Thus, males may be less likely victimized in child abductions, but more likely to seek legal redress.

5. Less than 10% of the children abducted are found.

Comments. This statistic is frequently cited in the popular literature and again in Congressional testimony (Clifford, 1979; U.S. Senate, 1980). It appears that this statistic too was first stated by Children's Rights Incorporated founders Arnold Miller and Ray Gummel (Duckworth, 1977). The most interesting aspect of this statistic is that it implies that the victims of parental abductions were lost--that is, their whereabouts were unknown to their parents. This aspect of child abduction--the inability to relocate abducted children--is perhaps the most emotionally laden aspect of the issue.

6. Children suffer from child snatching.

Comments. It is assumed by the parents who have children taken from them and by others concerned with the problem of child snatching that children who are abducted suffer severe and long lasting emotional and psychological consequences. Senator Alan Cranston, when introducing hearings on the problem of "child snatching," described child snatching as a "subtle form of child abuse" (U.S. Senate, 1979). Again, there is a lack of anything but anecdotal data on the consequences of being abducted for a child. The work of Wallerstein and Kelley (see Wallerstein and Kelly, 1976) suggest that the process of child abduction would have significant negative consequences for children. Still, there has been no research whatsoever which has systematically collected even descriptive data about children who have been abducted (if only 10 percent are ever relocated, than the population available for study of the consequences of abduction is small and skewed).

7. Social patterns: Agopian's (1980a; 1980b; 1981) examination of 91 cases of child stealing reveals a variety of data about the social demography of a limited number of cases of child stealing:

a. Boys and girls were snatched in equal numbers.

b. 66 percent of the children stolen were white; 22 percent were black.

c. Mean age of stolen children was 7; 61 percent of the children were under 8 years of age.

d. Mean age of the parental abductor was 32.

e. Peak times of abductions were April and September; Weekends, and Late Afternoon and Early Evenings.

Comments. It is difficult to draw significant conclusions from Agopian's data due to a variety of methodological problems and issues that are not resolved. Little can be made of the age or race data since no comparison group(s) was provided for in the study design. Agopian fails to compare his racial or age distribution to either the married population in the County of Los Angeles or the population of divorced or separated couples in the community. We have no way of knowing from Agopian's analysis whether the mean age of abducted children is higher, lower, or the same as the average age of children of divorced parents in the community. The same problem applies to race and age of the abductors.

Definitions of Parental Child Snatching

Just as there is presently a lack of descriptive or detailed research on parental child snatching, there is also no precise and consistent definition of child snatching available. The variety of definitions offered is as variable as the terms used to describe the phenomenon--abduction, snatching, kidnapping, stealing, unauthorized retention after visitation, etc.

Space precludes a full and elaborate review of the discussions of how to define parental child snatching. Perhaps the core of the definition is that a parent takes, restrains, or hides a child without the consent of the other parent. From here the problems multiply (actually the problems could begin with the core definition, since some might take issue with whether the child is taken, or restrained, or hidden, or perhaps even with the definition of parent).

Among the issues which may consider important in defining whether a situation constitutes child snatching are: (1) Was there a custody decree in place at the time of the incident? (2) Was the child removed or kept from his or her "normal residence?" (3) Was the child concealed? (4) Were there extenuating circumstances for the incident--for instance a battered women takes her children and hides with them in a battered wive shelter (Saunders and Bernheim, 1979)?

The answer to the definitional problem is central to the study of parental child snatching, but somewhat incidental to this paper. Suffice it to say that a definition was ultimately selected, that it probably pleases some people and probably offends others. Ten years of study of family violence has convinced me that there are no perfect definitions of family problems, and the researcher's prime responsibility is to at least provide a clear and concise definition that can either be replicated or critiqued (or both).

WHY BE CONCERNED WITH THE INCIDENCE OF CHILD SNATCHING?

Why measure the incidence of parental kidnapping? There are two reasons for making the scientific measurement of parental kidnapping a priority issue. First, from a strictly pragmatic point of view, one of the chief and necessary means of translating any social issue into a social problem is to demonstrate that the problem affects a significant number of people (Merton and Nisbet, 1976). The history of child abuse, wife abuse, family violence, and sexual abuse of children amply illustrates that although the tragedy, horror, and emotional pain of individual instances of abuse and neglect were sufficient to generate concern about these issues, it was not until there were scientifically generated data pointing to the millions of cases annually of abuse and violence that steps were taken to define these as social problems and as social policy issues for state and federal agencies and legislatures (Gelles, 1980). In the case of child abuse, the first federal legislation passed, establishing the federally supported National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect, included a clause in the legislation mandating a national incidence survey to measure the national and state by state incidence of abuse and neglect.

Secondly, from a strictly methodological point of view, it is necessary to know the incidence of parental child snatching in the general population and in the population of separated and divorced couples before one can begin to design survey research which could answer some of the key practical and policy questions surrounding this issue. Sooner or later, questions raised in the study of child snatching will have to be answered using representative sampling so that the results can be generalized to a wider population. It is impossible to <u>even begin planning</u> a survey using a representative sample unless the planner knows the expected incidence of the phenomenon. Unless the researcher knows how many homes will have to be surveyed to yield an appropriate number of subjects who can speak on child snatching (or child abuse, or wife abuse, etc.), then it is impossible to determine: (1) the total number of households which need to be contacted to yield an appropriate sample of both child snatchers and a comparison group; (2) how many hours of telephone charges will be needed to complete the study; (3) how many interviewer hours will be needed; and, (4) what the total cost of the study will be. Without an incidence figure, a responsible person calculating the cost of any survey of parental child snatching would surely risk drastically over or under budgeting the study (and one can be sure if the person doing the costing is from a survey research firm, the error s/he would most like to make is to overbudget!).

Now the trick here is that in order to get a real sense of the incidence, one needs to do a survey using a representative sample! This chicken and egg dilemma is a formidable obstacle to tackeling a study of any sensitive family problem with a perceived low base rate (Gelles, 1978). The resolution of this chicken and egg problem is discussed in a later section of this paper. The next section discusses the choice of telephone interviewing and why it is a useful and somewhat underutilized means of studying sensitive family topics such as child snatching.

THE ADVANTAGES OF TELEPHONE SURVEY TECHNIQUES

The advantages of telephone surveys have been previously documented (Groves and Kahn, 1979; Miller, Rollins, and Thomas, 1982; Klecka and Tuchfarber, 1978). In brief, these advantages include: ease of administration, lower cost than face to face interviewing, greater speed than face to face interviewing, and better access to hard to reach households. The drawbacks of telephone surveys include less than 100% telephone coverage of households, the biases of the telephone sampling frame, and the impact of the telephone itself on reliability and validity.

Beyond the documented advantages of the telephone as a survey research strategy, I believe there are additional assets of telephone interviewing for researchers interested in sensitive topics, such as child abuse, wife abuse, and parental child snatching. These advantages include a substantial cost efficiency, better response rate, and potentially increased reliability and validity.

Cost Efficiency

Groves and Kahn (1979) have already demonstrated that telephone surveys are about one-fourth the cost of in-person interviews. This cost savings is even more exagerated when the topic of choice has a low base rate. When I began my work, I had no idea of what the actual annual incidence of parental child snatching was. I assumed that, even the largest estimate of incidence would be less than one per cent (e.g. 100,000 out of 80 million households). Let's say that I wanted to conduct a survey which resulted in at least 200 interviews with people who had been involved in instances of child snatching. Given an annual incidence of one per cent, I would have to contact 20,000 households to yield 200 interviews (at a response rate and completion rate of 100%). Now, I would get my 200 interviews, but my interviews would have to knock on 19,800 doors in vain to produce the 200 interviews. Even assuming I wanted a comparison group, I surely do not need a group of 19,800 non-child snatchers. Now, the direct costs (telephone time and interview time) of 19,800 interviews which last about 2 minutes (the time needed to screen families), is not cheap, but it is certainly more reasonable than the prohibitive cost of sending interviewers to 19,800 different households.

Response Rate

Groves and Kahn (1979) reported in their 1979 comparison of telephone vs. in-person interviewing, that telephone interviews resulted in about 5 percent lower response rate. Interestingly, my experience has been that using the telephone to study topics such as spouse abuse, rape, and other sensitive topics produces higher response rates than one could expect from in-person interviews. When Murray Straus, Suzanne Steinmetz, and I conducted our national survey of family violence, we used in-person interviews. With extra effort, and our subcontracter cutting into their profit margin, we achieved a 65% response rate

(Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz, 1980). Three years later, I had the opportunity to replicate the spouse abuse part of the study by telephone in Kentucky. The response rate for that survey was 91 percent (Harris and Associates, 1979). Recently, I have consulted on two projects which have produced similar high response rates. A study of 1,500 women which asked them to self report instances of rape had a response rate of better than 89 percent. A second study of airforce personnel who have contact with Agent Orange asked for detailed discussions of sexual functioning. The result was a response rate of greater than 90 percent.

Reliability and Validity

Not only do the flexibility and anonymity of the telephone lead to high response rate, but there is reason to believe that these attributes of the survey technique yield data high in reliability and validity. Hochstim (1977) found that women were more likely to report alcohol use on the telephone than in-person. Bradburn, Sudman, and Associates (1979) found statistically indistinguishable differences in admitting to a conviction for drunken driving among persons who had in fact been convicted of that offense whether they were interviewed by telephone or in-person. Comparing our national survey of spousal violence to the survey in Kentucky, I found indistinguishable differences in the overall rate of violence reported. However, the differences between income groups were much less in the telephone survey than in the in-person survey. Granted, these are two different samples, but there is some reason to think that middle class respondents were somewhat more willing to report violence when interviewed by telephone than when interviewd in-person.

I would think that the telephone holds special advantages for studies of family issues. Given the sacred and private nature of the family, the anonymity of the telephone would seem to have significant methodological advantages. The interviewer does not come from the same community as the respondent and the respondent does not physically see the interviewer. The respondent does not have to worry that information divulged during the interview will become known to others in the community. The worst case of in-person interviews--that the interviewer and subject know each other or some of same people--can not happen over the telephone. This problem is indeed a risk with in-person interviewing in small towns or rural areas.

A significant asset of the telephone interview is that other members of the respondent's family cannot overhear the questions or find any evidence of the survey in the household. At best, they can only hear the respondent's answers. The respondent need not reveal to other family members the topic of the interview. Thus, the respondent does not have to worry about the reactions of, or repercussions from, other family members. Further, telephone interviewers can be trained to break off an interview with an offer to call back if the respondent sounds uncomfortable.

Another obvious advantage of telephone surveys is that interviewers are not present and cannot show physical signals or convey body language. Monitoring of telephone interviewers is much closer than the monitoring provided for in-person interviews, and interviewer reactions can be kept to a minimum.

The Process of Telephone Interviewing

Random Digit Dialing. The procedure which is at the core of making telephone interviewing an effective and efficient research strategy is random digit dialing (RDD). First introduced by Sudman in 1973, random digit dialing extends the potential coverage of telephone surveys to all but 5 percent of the U.S. population. RDD surveys improve upon the previous method of making telephone calls from lists since as many as 20 percent of all telephone subscribers have unlisted numbers. This problem is exacerbated because the rates of unlisted phones vary by demographic, regional, and socioeconomic factors. Estimates are that 26 percent of the telephone numbers in the West are unlisted, 29 percent of numbers in large metopolitan areas are unlisted, 25 percent of the numbers of those earning between $5,000 and $10,000 are unlisted, and the rate of unlisted numbers among non whites is 32 percent. Moreover, as telephone directories become outdated, non-inclusion rates rise, to a high of perhaps 40 percent. in New York and Chicago. Obviously, the use of published telephone numbers as the sampling universe is considered too biased and non-inclusive for telephone surveys.

The actual use of RDD is a two stage process. In the first step, area codes and exchanges are stratified (e.g. 401-783) which each record potentially representing 10,000 possible telephone numbers (e.g. 401-783-0000 through 401-783-9999). Area codes and exchanges are stratified by type of place (SMSA, non-SMSA) and region (East, South Midwest, West). This same stratification process can be used for non-national samples such as states, counties, or a city. The second stage involves selecting telephone numbers. A four digit number is randomly generated and appended to the area code and exchange. Each full number is dialed. If it proves to be a working residential number, the entire number becomes part of the sample.

For purposes of family research, and in the case of studying a topic such as parental child snatching, a third step may be added. Once a residential telephone number has been reached, the interviewers obtain a list of all members of the household and can then ask some "screening questions" to see if the household fits the sampling criteria (e.g. married, living together, working wife, dual career, etc.).

RDD sampling also includes techniques for weighting the sample. This is relevant because of the possibility that some households (like mine) may have more than one telephone number. Also, if households have two eligible respondents, these respondents have only 50 percent of the probability of being included in the sample as a single eligible respondent household.

The benefits of the RDD sample is that it is (1) highly representative; (2) unlisted telephones have the sample probability of inclusion as listed telephones, and (3) the names of the respondents and their addresses are not known to the interviewer. The drawback of the RDD sample is the inability to reach the 5 to 7 percent of households without telephone service. These are largely low income, rural, minority, rental units. It is likely that these are the residential units that are also difficult to access for in-person interviews.

Length. The rule of thumb in telephone interviewing is that the length should not exceed 20 minutes. Roughly translated, this means that a researcher can ask between 90 and 130 closed ended questions. There does not seem to be much in the way of empirical evidence to say that telephone interviews get less reliable after 20 minutes, but the conventional wisdom is that this is the optimum length. Of course, those interested in in-person interviews have traveled this path before. Forty years ago, researchers assumed that few people would allow an interviewer to interview them in-person for longer than 30 minutes. Now, in-person interviews of an hour in length are the norm, and the interviews often go longer than an hour and a half. Nevertheless, I have heard no one advocate telephone interviews run longer than 45 minutes.

Form. While one can ask closed or open ended interviews on the telephone, the format does present some limitations. Whereas many complex in-person interview schedules employ cards for the subjects to use in answering questions (cards listing the response categories of the items or scales), or sort cards for scaling items, such cards can only be used in telephone interviewing if they are mailed to the respondents before the interview. With RDD sampling, this is nearly impossible, and if possible certainly eliminates the anonymity factor as well as influencing completion rates. Thus, telephone interviews involve the limitation that the items can not be too complex to administer.

Quality. Groves and Kahn's exhaustive comparison of telephone and in-person interviews (1979) very convincingly demonstrates that there are no differences in the results one obtains using either method. The obvious caveat is that one really does not know whether either method produces valid data. As I noted earlier, there are some indications that the rates of reporting of taboo or sensitive issues are more valid using the telephone than in-person interviews, but this is still rather speculative.

A PRELIMINARY STUDY OF PARENTAL CHILD SNATCHING

As I stated earlier, the first important obstacle which had to be overcome if research on parental child snatching was to go forward, was to determine the base rate of child snatching. The solution I chose was to do what David Gil had done fifteen years earlier. Gil, concerned with the problem of child abuse, also wanted to get some sense of the annual incidence of his issue. He found that official statistics drastically underestimated the extent of abuse, in part because all fifty states did not have mandatory reporting laws for child abuse prior to 1970 (Gil, 1970). Gil chose to purchase, or "tack-on" questions about child abuse to a national survey being conducted by the National Opinion Research Corporation (Gil, 1970). NORC added Gil's questions to one of their in-person surveys. First, Gil defined child abuse for the respondents. Then, subjects were asked if they ever physically injured their children. Of the 1,520 subjects, 6 answered in the affirmative. The survey also asked whether the subjects knew of neighbors who had physically injured their children. Regarding that question, 45 answered in the affirmative. Gil projected this to an estimate of between 2.53 and 4.07 million children physically abused each year (Gil, 1970).

My problem was that 1,250 subjects would probably be too small a sample for a phenomenon assumed to be as rare as parental child snatching. Thus, I chose to purchase questions and tack them on to three surveys of 1,250 subjects each. Since the three samples were to be generated independently (using Random Digit Dialing), I had the equivalent of a national sample of nearly 3,750 subjects. The total cost of adding the questions to the three surveys was $10,000.

Procedure

The procedure I used was essentially the same as Gil employed in 1965 except that my interviews were conducted over the telephone. The parental child snatching questions were added onto a 20 minute telephone interview. The interviews were conducted by Louis Harris and Associates. These interviews constitute what is referred to as the Harris Poll. The Harris firm fields a national public opinion survey about once or twice a month. They also field numerous other proprietary national surveys. These surveys ask about topics ranging from approval ratings of the President, to economic issues, to general topics of current interest. At the end of the Harris polls, which I tacked-on to, respondents were told that they would be asked a few questions about parental child snatching (see questions in Appendix A). Then parental child snatching was defined. The first question asked if the respondent had personal knowledge of a child snatching incident in the previous twelve months. If respondents answered "no," "not sure," or refused to answer, the interview was ended. For those answering "yes," a series of follow-up questions were asked concerning how many cases the respondent knew about, how many children were snatched, and how the respondent knew about the incident.

The full results of this survey are reported in a paper which I will be presenting at the annual meeting of the National Council on Family Relations which follows this workshop (Gelles, 1983). The general results of the survey were that: When asked if they had personal knowledge of an incident of parental child snatching which occurred in the previous year, 7 percent of the respondents answered, "yes." When we tracked down how they had personal knowledge of an incident, we found that 55, or 1.5 percent of the overall sample, indicated that they were personally involved in the incident.

Advantages and Problems

The obvious advantage of this procedure was cost-efficiency. I only paid for my four questions. Since the demographic questions were already part of the main survey, I got them for free.

The obvious disadvantage is that four questions are so narrow a survey that the end result is the raising of more questions than are answered. For instance, when I was finished, I had no idea about how long each incident of snatching was. There is certainly a difference between a child who is taken for an hour, day, or few days, opposed to a child who is taken for months or years. Secondly, I had no specific idea what personal involvement meant.

I assumed it meant that the respondent was either the parent who snatched the child or the parent from whom the child was taken. But, it could be a lawyer, judge, police officer, or someone else whose work would cause them to be involved in an instance of child snatching.

Another problem arose when it came time to project the percentages to a national population. When Gil conducted his study in 1965, he projected the results about knowledge of abuse in neighbor families to all adults 18 years of age or older (the sampling frame). This is obviously a correct procedure, but it has one major problem--it assumes that only one person per household knows about an incident of child abuse in a neighbor's family. Let's say the average household in 1965 had two adults living there. If both persons knew of the same instance of child abuse, then Gil's incidence estimate would be high by at least 100 percent!

I assumed that if one person in a household knew of an instance of parental child snatching, than others would know as well. Thus, initially, I projected my findings to all households. This produced an estimate that was so large it had to be wrong. Then I realized that in nearly all instances of children being snatched, they would be taken from one household to another. At least two households are involved in each incident of snatching. Thus, the projections to all households had to be halved. Of course, since my four questions did not allow me to get data on the exact nature of personal involvement, it could be that some of my respondents were involved as non-parents (e.g. lawyers, friends, accomplices, private detectives). As I could not estimate the average number of people involved in each snatching, I had no idea of how many households were involved in each snatching.

Of course, when the results of the survey are released, critics may well take issue with the definition I used, and will find the questions and problems I have raised as well as many more. Nevertheless, the survey did produce an empirical estimate of the percentage of households which are involved in parental child snatching. This allowed me to design a larger study which could begin to more fully estimate the incidence of child snatching as well as the demographics of the families involved.

FUTURE RESEARCH

With a preliminary estimate of the incidence of parental child snatching, and some evidence that people will at least admit to personal involvement over the telephone, I am ready for the next stage of the research.

My objectives in the next research project are to develop a more precise estimate of the incidence of child snatching, as well as assess the nature and consequences of parental child snatching.

In order to meet these objectives, I am planning a national cross-sectional survey of the adult population. The national cross-section will yield a representative sample of cases of child snatching which in turn may yield a detailed profile of victims, offenders, situations, and outcomes.

I am planning to obtain a sample of two hundred recent cases of parental child snatching. Given the estimated incidence of personal involvement in a recent (within the last twelve months) case of child snatching is 1.5 percent of the adult population, a representative sample of 13,333 interviews would yield 200 cases of child snatching. Assuming a 75 percent response rate among the identified population, I would have to screen 17,750 households to obtain 200 complete interviews.

Not only is the sampling task a formidable part of the research project, but the sensitive nature of child snatching means that it might be difficult to obtain a reasonable response rate if the interview were to start with questions about child snatching. The pilot study placed the child snatching questions at the end of a rather innocuous poll. Thus, I am planning to again add my child snatching interviews onto a national current events or voter preference poll. This has the dual benefit of allowing the telephone interviewers to establish rapport with the respondents before the sensitive questions are asked, and it also reduces the overall cost of the study, since, again, the demographic questions will be part of the poll.

Because my sample will be a national probability sample, I do not plan on conducting extensive interviews with non-parental child snatching respondents. I can compare the demographic data from the child snatching families with either census data, or with the demographic information obtained from the national polls which will precede the child snatching questions. This is essentially a cost saving choice, but one which appears to be justifiable given the nature of the sample.

At this point, the total estimated costs of the conducting 20 minute telephone interviews with 200 persons having personal involvement in instances of parental child snatching is about $100,000. The actual direct costs of conducting the interviews (telephone time, interviewer time, supplies, sampling, and data processing), comes to about $24,000. While this is about $120 per child snatching interview, it is important to remember that a large part of the costs is the screening out of people who have not been involved in instances of child snatching. With 17,750 households to be contacted, the direct costs are $1.35 per household contact.

CONCLUSION

I am convinced at this point that without the cost benefits and the possible methodological benefits of telephone interviewing, a study of an issue like parental child snatching would be nearly impossible to conduct. I know of no cheaper or more efficient way to conducting a preliminary incidence survey than the tack-on pilot study which I conducted. I also doubt that funding agencies would go along with, or could afford a study which involved having in-person interviewers screen 17,000 households to reach 200 potential subjects.

I have already mentioned the methodological advantages of the telephone interview. These advantages also apply to ethical and human subjects considerations. Some people might know that the Phil Donohue Show was recently sued by a women whose child was taken from her by her former husband. The husband and the child appeared on the Donohue Show, and because the show would not provide the mother with the location of her son, she sued. I would suspect that there would be numerous human subject and ethical problems if interviewers knew the identities of respondents who admitted that they were hiding snatched children. Moreover, there is the question of whether people who had snatched their children would admit that in an in-person interview (of course, I did conduct a study where people admitted to violence towards children and spouses in an in-person interview, so anything is possible).

My sales pitch for the advantages of the telephone interview is not without some lingering doubts. Surely the method and the costs are attractive. But I continue to be concerned about the brevity of the interview. Twenty minutes simply does not allow for many questions. I am also concerned that there still is no research which speaks to the possible artifactual biases introduced by the telephone. Lastly, results from telephone and in-person interviews are similar, but the validity of both is still an open question.

FOOTNOTES

1. This paper, as is the case with many others, will also use these terms interchangeably.

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Now I want to ask you a question or two about parental child snatching. Let me explain what I mean by parental child snatching.

For our purposes, the parents can be married, separated, or divorced. There does not have to be a legal custody decree.

Parental child snatching is when a parent physically takes, restrains, or does not return a child under the age of 14 after a visit, and keeps the child concealed so that the other parent does not know where the child is.

INTERVIEWER: "RESTRAIN" MEANS PREVENTS THE CHILD FROM RETURNING TO OR CONTACTING THE OTHER PARENT.

1a. Do you know of an instance of parental child snatching which has occurred in your family or a family of someone you personally know in the last twelve months?

Yes, know of an instance.....(40(____-1 (ASK Q.1b)

No, don't know of instance.....____-2
Not sure.....____-3 (SKIP TO Q.F1)
Refused.....____-4

1b. How many different families do you know about in which an instance of child snatching occurred?

(RECORD NUMBER)

____
(41-42)

Not sure.....(43(____-1
Refused.....____-2

ASK Q.1c and Q.1d IN SEQUENCE FOR UP TO FOUR OF THE FAMILIES REPORTED IN Q.1b. IF MORE THAN ONE INSTANCE PER FAMILY, PROBE FOR THE MOST RECENT.

1c. How many children were snatched? RECORD BELOW

1d. How do you know about this instance? DO NOT READ LIST, SINGLE RECORD BELOW

Q.1c	1st Family	2nd Family	3rd Family	4th Family
Number of children snatched..... (RECORD NUMBER)	(44-45)	(48-49)	(52-53)	(56-57)
Not sure.....	(46(-1	(50(-1	(54(-1	(58(-1

Q.1d

How Know About

a. Was personally involved in the incident.....	(47(-1	(51(-1	(55(-1	(59(-1
b. Heard about it directly from family involved.....	-2	-2	-2	-2
c. Heard about it from other people in the community.....	-3	-3	-3	-3
d. Heard rumors about it.....	-4	-4	-4	-4
e. Read about it in the papers.....	-5	-5	-5	-5
f. Heard about it on radio or television.....	-6	-6	-6	-6
Other (SPECIFY).....	-7	-7	-7	-7
Not sure/can't remember.....	-8	-8	-8	-8

60-67Z